

## 8. The epics of India



### Lesson objectives

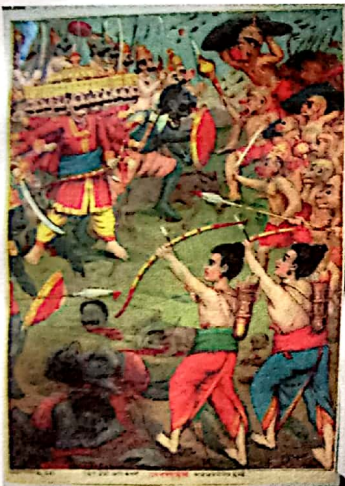
After reading this lesson, you will be able to:

- explain who the Aryans were
- describe their two main epics: the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*

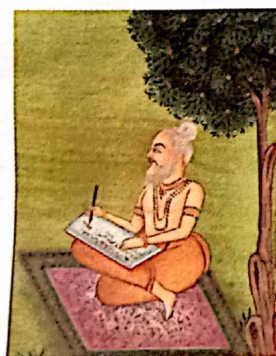
### The coming of the Aryans

Around 1900 BC, a group of nomadic people from Central Asia crossed the mighty Himalayas, and came to India. They were called the **Aryans**.

The Aryans first settled on the banks of the river Indus. Over hundreds of years, the Aryans



Rama, Lakshmana and the monkey army fight against Ravana and his army at the Battle of Lanka

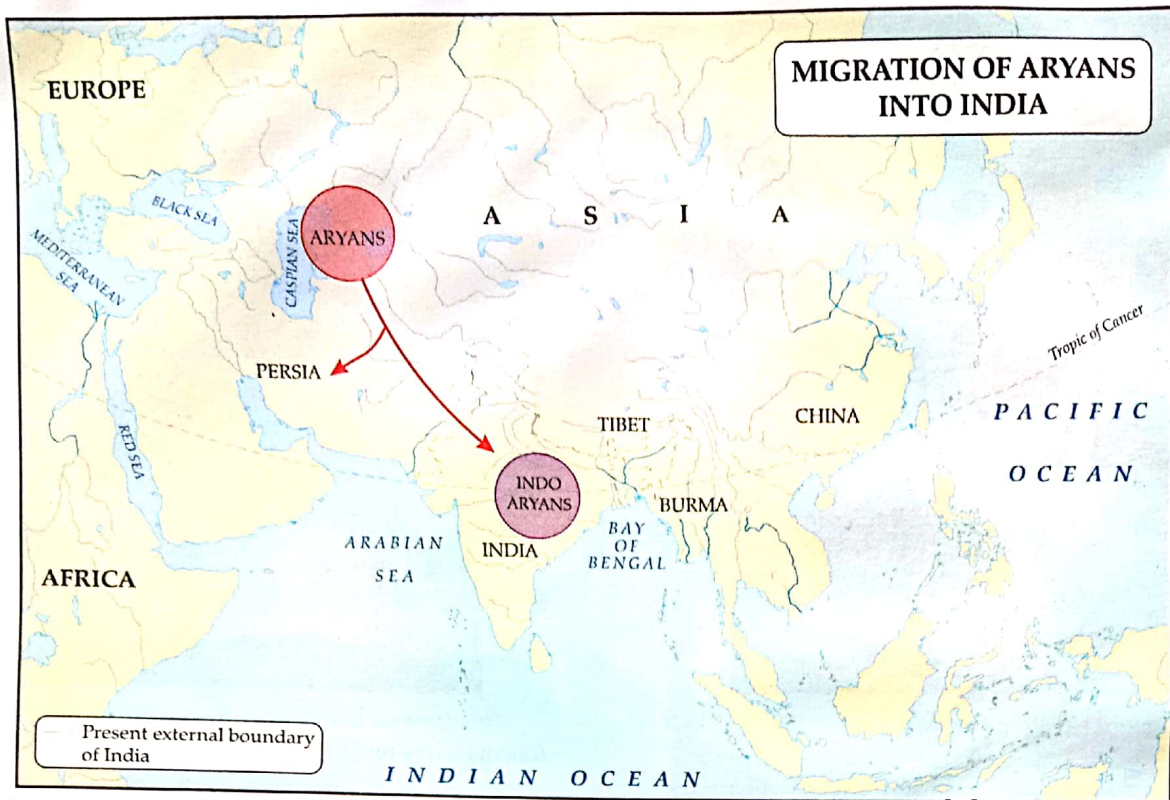


Valmiki

spread eastwards across the Ganga plains. By 600 BC, there were several powerful kingdoms ruled by the Aryans in India.

### The epics

The Aryans had a rich store of stories and poems that they passed on from one generation to the other **orally**. Some of these songs and poems



Migration of the Aryans

were about the lives and deeds of great heroes. They were also very long. We call such poems **epics**.

Two of these long poems or epics became very famous. Many people read them even today. They are the **Ramayana** and the **Mahabharata**.

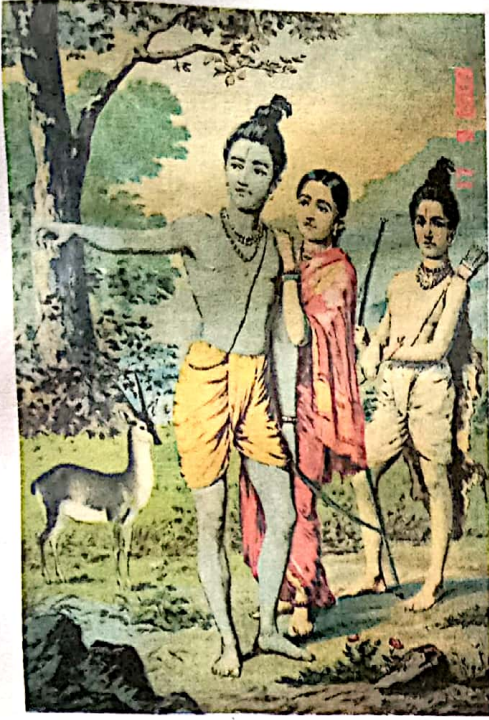
### **The Ramayana**

People believe that the **Ramayana** was composed by a poet called **Valmiki** in the ancient **Sanskrit** language. It follows the story of prince **Rama** and his victory over Ravana, the king of Lanka. It tells how Rama overcame many **obstacles** to become a just and fair king of **Ayodhya**.

**King Dasharatha** ruled over the kingdom of Ayodhya. He had three wives. Rama was his eldest son, and everyone thought that he would become king of Ayodhya after his father.

But Rama's step-mother, **Kaikeyi**, wanted her own son, **Bharata**, to be the next king. So, she made the king send Rama out of the kingdom to live in the forest for 14 years. When Rama left the kingdom, two people who loved him dearly went along with him. It was his wife **Sita**, and his brother **Lakshmana**.

While they were in the forest, Rama and Lakshmana fought many



Rama, Sita and Lakshmana had to live in the forest for 14 years.

demons or **rakshasas**. This made the king of demons, the ten-headed **Ravana**, very angry.

One day, Ravana tricked Rama and Lakshmana into leaving Sita alone in the hut they were living in. He then **kidnapped** Sita and carried her away to **Lanka**, his kingdom.

The two brothers searched everywhere for Sita. **Sugriva**, the king of the monkey people, helped them by sending his soldiers to different parts of the world to search for Sita. It was finally **Hanuman**, a general in Sugriva's army, who found Sita seated in a garden in Ravana's kingdom.

The two princes and the monkey army fought a great battle against



This famous painting by Raja Ravi Varma shows Ravana carrying Sita after defeating the vulture Jatayu.

the rakshasas. The two armies fought for many days and nights. Finally, Rama used a magic arrow he had got from the sun god to cut off Ravana's ten heads.

After 14 long years of exile, Rama, Sita and Lakshmana returned to their kingdom at Ayodhya. Rama was crowned king and ruled over Ayodhya justly.

### *The Mahabharata*

The *Mahabharata* is one of the longest Sanskrit poems. It is believed to have been created by the sage **Vyasa** over 2,000 years ago. The epic describes the battle between the five **Pandava** brothers and their 100 **Kaurava** cousins, for the throne of **Hastinapura**.

### Get active

Each of these epics has smaller stories about gods, people and demons within them. Try to find out these stories from the *Ramayana*:

- How Ravana tricked Rama and Lakshmana into leaving the cottage
- How Hanuman flew, carrying an entire mountain with one hand
- How Hanuman's tail was set on fire and how he escaped

**Duryodhana** was the eldest of the Kauravas and **Yudhishtira** was the eldest among the Pandavas. Each believed that he alone should be king of Hastinapura. Duryodhana hatched a cunning plan with his uncle, **Shakuni**, to win the kingdom from Yudhishtira.

The Kauravas invited Yudhishtira for a game of dice. They cheated each time, and Yudhishtira lost the game to them over and over again. Each time he lost, the Kauravas won something from him. In this way, Yudhishtira gave away his kingdom, his wealth, his brothers, and even **Draupadi**, the wife the five brothers were married to. He lost everything.

The Pandavas were banished from the kingdom for thirteen years.

When the Pandavas returned after thirteen years, Duryodhana refused

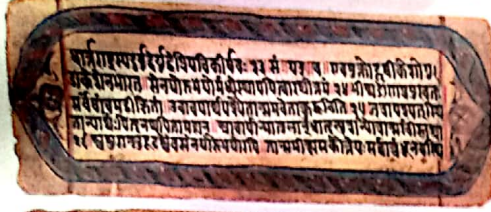
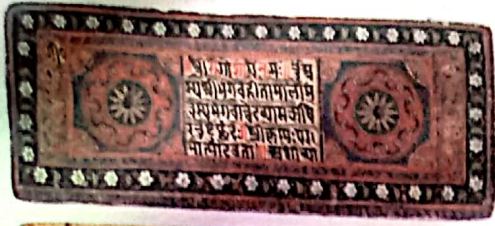


Draupadi and the five Pandava brothers – Yudhishtira, Bhima, Arjuna, Nakula and Sahadeva

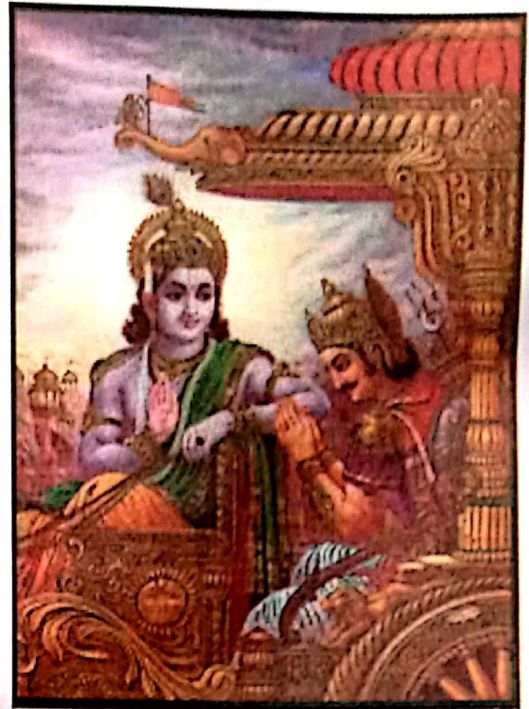
to return Hastinapura to them. The Pandavas knew they would have to fight to get back their kingdom. War was declared and the armies of the Kauravas and Pandavas met at Kurukshetra. The **Great War of Kurukshetra** had started!



Yudhishtira gives away his kingdom and family in a game of dice.



A manuscript of the *Bhagavad Gita*



Arjuna listening to Krishna's words

**Krishna**, believed to be the god Vishnu himself, drove the chariot for Arjuna. On the battlefield, just before the fighting began, Arjuna lay down

his bow and refused to fight. He told Krishna that he could not kill his uncles, cousins and teachers.

Krishna then explained to Arjuna the difference between good and



The Great Battle of Kurukshetra

evil and his duties as a prince and human being. This section of the epic is called the *Bhagavad Gita*. To many Hindus, this is the most important part of the *Mahabharata*.

The battle went on for many days, but finally, most of the Kauravas were

killed. In a final battle, Bhima, the strongest of the Pandava brothers, killed Duryodhana. The war was finally over.

Yudhishtira was crowned king and the Pandava brothers ruled over Hastinapura for many years.

### Go beyond!

Do you know that the kings of ancient India were some of the earliest **environmentalists**? This story of King Shibi appears in both the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*. Environmentalists are people who protect the environment and care for all living beings.

#### The Story of King Shibi

King Shibi was a good and just king. He had promised to protect everyone who lived in his kingdom. The gods decided to test King Shibi.

One day while the king was resting, a frightened dove flew into his lap asking for shelter. An eagle was trying to catch it. The king believed that all living things needed to be protected, even trees, animals and birds, so he hid the frightened bird. The angry eagle asked the king to release the dove as it was his food.



The king asked the eagle to spare the bird. But the eagle agreed to spare the bird only if the king gave him flesh from his body that weighed as much as the dove. He also said that he could not accept the king's flesh, if the king shed even a single tear while giving his flesh.

The dove was placed in a pan on the weighing scales, and flesh from the king's right thigh was placed in the other pan. The king kept adding flesh but the bird always weighed more. Soon the whole of his right side was placed in the pan, but still the dove was heavier.

A drop of tear appeared in the king's left eye. The eagle cried that he could not accept a gift that was not given happily.

To this the king replied that the tear fell out of joy. He felt happy that he could give his body to feed the hungry eagle. The king had passed his test. The gods took on their true form and blessed the king with a long and happy life.

## New words

- \* composed: created
- \* exile: sent away from one's own kingdom
- \* Sanskrit: an ancient Indian language
- \* obstacles: problems
- \* rakshasas: demons
- \* sage: a wise person
- \* kidnap: to take someone away by force
- \* general: one of the leaders in an army

## Recap

- \* Around 1900 BC, groups of people came into India from the north-west. They were called the Aryans. They spread into India and established powerful kingdoms.
- \* The two great epics of India are the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. They were composed in Sanskrit.
- \* People believe that Valmiki composed the *Ramayana* and that Vyasa composed the *Mahabharata*.
- \* The *Ramayana* is the story of Prince Rama and how he became the king of Ayodhya after defeating Ravana, the demon-king. His wife was Sita and his brother was Lakshmana.
- \* The *Mahabharata* is about the struggle between the five Pandavas and the hundred Kauravas for the throne of Hastinapura.
- \* The *Bhagavad Gita* is a section from the *Mahabharata* where Krishna explains to Arjuna the difference between good and evil and the importance of doing one's duties.

## Exercises

### I. Name the following.

1. The monkey king who helped Rama find Sita after Ravana took her away: Hanuman
2. Rama's brother, who went with him on exile: Lakshmana
3. The wife of the Pandavas: Draupadi
4. The game that Yudhishtira played with the Kauravas, because of which he lost his kingdom: Dice
5. The kingdom that the Pandavas fought for: Hastinapura

### II. To which epic do these people belong—the *Ramayana* or the *Mahabharata*? Write the name of the epic beside the name of the person.

- |                                    |                                 |
|------------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| 1. Yudhishtira: <u>Mahabharata</u> | 2. Kaikeyi: <u>Ramayana</u>     |
| 3. Lakshmana: <u>Ramayana</u>      | 4. Shakuni: <u>Mahabharata</u>  |
| 5. Hanuman: <u>Ramayana</u>        | 6. Draupadi: <u>Mahabharata</u> |

7. Ravana: Ramayana  
9. Arjuna: Mahabharata

8. Krishna: Mahabharata  
10. Rama: Ramayana

II. Answer the following questions